

Statement of  
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BEFORE THE  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY AND SPACE  
COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, SCIENCE AND TRANSPORTATION  
UNITED STATES SENATE

ON  
THE DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE'S PLAN TO CLOSE THE  
NATIONAL TECHNICAL INFORMATION SERVICE

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 21, 1999  
2:30 P.M.

ROOM 253  
SENATE RUSSELL OFFICE BUILDING

Mister Chairperson and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting the National Commission on Libraries and Information Science to participate in this review of the Department of Commerce's plan to close the National Technical Information Service (NTIS). I am Joan Challinor, a Member of the National Commission and I appear here today at the request of our Chairperson, Jeanne Hurley Simon, who would be here herself but for the fact she is undergoing treatment for cancer in her home in Illinois.

NCLIS

NCLIS is an independent agency created by a far-sighted Congress in 1970 when it passed PL 91-345. The Commission is comprised of Presidential appointees who meet four or five times a year for the specific purpose of developing advice for the President and the Congress on matters pertaining to library and information needs of the nation. Therefore, it is appropriate for us to provide testimony, and offer further assistance if the Congress wishes, on the NTIS proposal, a matter that we believe is of critical importance to the information needs of the people of the United States.

## REFORMS NEEDED IN PUBLIC INFORMATION DISSEMINATION

The entire question of government information dissemination needs a thoroughgoing discussion. On September 23, 1999, we wrote to the Chair of this Subcommittee that the Department of Commerce's proposal to close NTIS provides a very timely opportunity to consider ways to strengthen the overall policy, as well as the organizational and legal machinery for delivery of Federal information to the public. Greater understanding of the entire question of government information must precede discussion on the future of NTIS. The Commission is very concerned that the short-term measures that must be taken to transfer authorities, functions, and resources of NTIS by the end of Fiscal Year 2000 not cause the Congress to defer the more substantive considerations relating to the need for basic reforms in government information dissemination.

NCLIS has been heavily involved since its establishment nearly thirty years ago in examining Federal information dissemination policies, programs and projects. Included in the material we recently sent to this subcommittee was a copy of the final report of our most recent study "Assessment of Electronic Government Information Products." This study is an in-depth investigation, undertaken by a contractor (Westat, Inc.) under our supervision, of the plans and practices of Federal agencies to migrate ink-on-paper and microform Government information products to electronic formats and mediums.

We worked directly with the Government Printing Office (GPO) on this two-year study completed on March 30, 1999. The study is a direct outgrowth of Congressional concerns over the impact of electronic publishing on the ability of citizens to obtain access to Government information, particularly through the Federal Depository Library Program.

The heart of the study was a nine-month survey which enjoyed the active support and participation of all three branches of government. Twenty-four different Federal entities participated, including the Supreme Court, several committees of the Congress, one regulatory commission, and 19 executive branch agencies (including most of the cabinet departments). In addition to this broad and diverse participation, an impressive 74% of the survey forms (242 out of 328 sent to the agencies) were returned completed, which is a highly unusual rate of return for what was a very complex questionnaire with over 100 questions.

Among the key findings of the survey was the observation that there is an overall lack of government information policy to guide electronic publishing and dissemination, permanent public access to Federal information holdings, and other information policies as they relate to agency missions. Also, there is a lack of overall coordination of these initiatives at the governmental, branch, and even at the agency level. The study found that responsibility for electronic publishing within agencies is decentralized, diffuse and unclear. Some agencies either could not identify or had difficulty identifying the individual within their own agency who was responsible for a specific electronic product.

## CORRELATION OF NCLIS STUDY TO NTIS CLOSURE

It is fair to ask "What do the findings of the aforementioned NCLIS study have to do with the planned closure of NTIS?" We believe there are at least four connections.

First, the public good represented by the NTIS collections -- which are owned by the people of the United States -- must remain accessible to them irrespective of where those collections are organizationally housed within the Federal structure. The Department of Commerce has made it very clear that it does not believe it should continue to house and manage these kind of data and document holdings, even if a way could be found to make the program break even. The question is, "Where is the appropriate location -- is it the Library of Congress, the Government Printing Office, some combination of the two, or another as yet unidentified organization?"

Second, the nation's 1350 federal depository libraries which, under law, are supposed to be the "first line of defense" in providing government information to citizens, are "not in the loop." These institutions need to be assured that agency information is systematically, routinely, and regularly identified, cataloged and made available to them quickly after it is published, and that information is not discontinued from an agency web site without warning.

Senators John Warner and Wendell Ford of the Senate Committee on Rules and Administration, during the 105th Congress, wrote in their letter directing the NCLIS study on electronic information products, "the Federal Depository Library Program served, and continues to serve the American public by insuring localized access to federal government information. The mission continues to be as important today to the fundamental success of our democracy as it was when that program was first created. The program's original mandate, to assist Americans regardless of economic, educational, or geographic considerations, is one that must not be lost as we strategically and thoughtfully use the tools of the electronic age to enhance that mandate."

The NTIS closure will certainly exacerbate the problems being faced by users of the federal depository libraries, as well as users of public and private libraries across the country who are already worrying, waiting to find out who the new Federal provider(s) of scientific, technical, and engineering information will be.

Third, Federal agency chief information officers (CIOs) do not regard public information dissemination as a high priority. They are, understandably, far more consumed in the day-to-day challenges of dealing with the Y2K problem, and replacing rapidly obsolescing information handling hardware and software with state-of-the-art versions. They are coping with the very difficult challenge of trying to ensure that their information technology expenditures are paying off in terms of their primary agency missions -- an area for which they are regularly reviewed by their own inspectors general, the White House, the Congress, and the General Accounting Office. Even though the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) strongly supported the NCLIS study, it is not surprising that front line information managers give a lower priority to information dissemination and long-term availability.

Last but by no means least, federal information management policies are a patchwork quilt of disconnected concerns that have not been harmonized into a unified Federal information policy fabric. Here we are talking about matters of privacy, copyright, security, authentication, encryption, permanent public access, permanent records retention, the use of metadata tools such as the Government Information Locator System (GILS), and many other areas. NCLIS found in its survey that agency personnel were unaware of many of the policies; they were bewildered and confused on how, if at all, the concepts and requirements they do know about fit together in an overall information life cycle context as required by the Paperwork Reduction Reauthorization Act of 1995 and other legislation. In short, while there are individual Federal agency CIOs in each agency, there is no CIO of CIOs at the Executive Office of the President level who is charged with overall Federal information policy and program planning, coordination, management, and control.

### WHAT DOES NCLIS PROPOSE?

We believe that the matter of transferring the NTIS holdings out of the Department of Commerce should not be addressed by the Congress and the President in an ad hoc manner, disembodied from the overarching consideration of strengthening overall Federal information management policy in the areas of public information dissemination and electronic publishing. We applaud the gigantic strides being made by the Government in migrating ink-on-paper and microform holdings to electronic formats and mediums, especially to agency web sites, but we are very concerned that in the absence of strong leadership and guidance, there is a real risk that public information dissemination will continue to fragment. Its cost-effectiveness and efficiency will erode along with that fragmentation and compartmentalization. The public is now confronted with a daunting array of Federal information indexes, indexing systems, gateways, cataloging schemes, software protocols, hardware platforms, and URL addresses that defy understanding except by the most sophisticated computer and information literate experts. The ordinary citizens, including even some librarians on the firing line, don't have a chance!

NCLIS proposes to be given an opportunity to make a three to six month assessment of overall Federal information dissemination policies, programs, authorities, responsibilities, functions, and other considerations, and how the proposed NTIS closing fits into this framework. We would then make a series of specific recommendations to the President and the Congress on how to simplify, streamline and harmonize this critically important area as we move further into the Internet era. Such an assessment could be done in a time frame that would still permit the Department of Commerce to meet its timetable with respect to the transfer of NTIS.

Thank you Mr. Chairman for affording our Commission this opportunity to share our views, and we would welcome the opportunity to discuss our findings and recommendations in more detail with you at your convenience.